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The Winning Game

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The Winning Game

A POEM

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BY
EDWARD WALDO EMERSON

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THE WINNING GAME

THE waning Century knows his knell is rung
When thirty times the pendent moon has swung
Around the planet, yet his untamed eye
New wonders, triumphs, glories doth descry.
Yea, were the moons but moments, his proud hope
No less with Destiny again would cope.
His armèd eye hath pierced the human wall,
Hath leaped o'er distance dizzy to appal
Man's reeling senses. Now his eager ear
Voices antipodal, ay, dead, would hear.
That fatal hand hath with the lightning wrought;
Those feet, the roe outrun, would challenge thought;
That mind, o'er pain victorious, deal with death.
Hark! what is that he utters with full breath?
"I lift the curse. No more break ye the clods;
Made godlike by my gifts, be ye as gods!
For Man is no more a child
His eager will to yield:
No more shall the dreamer mild
Prating through Earth's treasure-field
Lead the foolish son of earth:
Are gold and gramerye nothing worth?

"That old-time Wisdom by the Hebrew sung,
That erring maiden, named in Grecian tongue
PHILOSOPHY, no more shall lead astray,
With LIFE to guide her on the one true way.
For Life is rich and fertile, strong and brave,
Beyond compare a glorious boon to have.
Woo her, O Son; her sister well may bide;
Behold how I have dowered her for thy bride.
The dumb and rugged Earth to her hath told
The spells commanding fire and bread and gold,
The heaving wastes of Ocean's uneared plain
To her no more a steely glittering chain,
For her the blue and blasting fire of heaven
A speedier Iris for her mandates given.
And mark the giant foemen of thy race,
Grim, stubborn Matter, ancient Time and Space,
Humbled and bound her bridal train to grace.
Behold the tyrants of the days of yore,
Tradition, Reverence, Worship, Ancient Lore, —
All these discrowned shall hamper Life no more.

"I have righted an ancient wrong,
The mouldered bonds I have burst;
For Cunning and Might have been chained too long,
And the last shall now be first.
Would you wit of what I have done,
And number my barriers broken?
On the new world shining under the sun
Look forth for a sign and a token!

"See king and priest and yoeman,
The matron and the maid, —
Following Fortune on her wheel
They whirl through the sun and shade.
Where is the reverent scholar,
A thought for his rich reward?
Where the man of God with his chastening rod,
And where is the haughty bard?

"Long may ye search for them:
If ye find them, few will heed,
For Earth's blind forces are the game
Man follows — Power and Speed.
For Speed from thieving Time shall snatch
The hours reft from Man,
And Power can all things overmatch.
The kingdom comes to him who *can*.

"Pale priests of the Ideal,
Sit ye apart and dream.
In the triumph-day of the Real
He needs not things that seem.
That brain the primal force shall find,
Those feet, the way by man ne'er trod;
That armed eye and audacious mind
Invade the temple of each god.

"He has read his scroll in the rocks,
He has read his doom in the sun,
At the impossible he mocks,

He rends the veil and he scorns the locks
Till his appointed day be done,
And he shall abide his doom,
When he and his triumphs, swathed in mould,
Hearsed in a planet dead and cold,
Ride through the ages to their tomb."

And a Voice answers, though no form is seen, —
The voice of one strong, happy, and serene.
Or soon, or late, that voice must still be heard;
Calm and secure she taketh up the word:

"Over the marshes brown,
Over the creeping river,
There where he silent glides along
Or joins with the breeze in rippling song,
Wrestling with Father Ocean ever,
On the boles of ancient trees
Once the home of Dryades,
Now green-swathed by the Naiades,
Lies a labyrinthine span
Iron-shod for ways of man.

"There in the iron cavern's mouth,
Reeking smoke and black with grime,
By gleam of mail under the sun,
By glowing eye when day is done
See thy swart genii girt to run,
Conquerors of Space and Time.

"Sinew of steel and lungs of brass,
Urged by the elemental flame,

Fed on the black rocks from the mine,
The round Earth's juice for their cup of wine,
Waiting the word to hurl the mass
Of Man and Matter, of joy and shame,
That like a meteor shall pass
The wild and the haunts of toiling man.
Thy mighty works, O Century, scan.
Right proud thou art, and well may'st be,
And yet perchance 't were well for thee
The scene with other eyes to see.

"Where from yon dusky cave
Dark gleaming steel and dull red glow
Thy fleet and fire-breath'd monsters show,
Hark to that pæan brave!
Is it *they* that sing and pant and feel?
Can life inform the cold grey steel?
In those black bulks can earthly fire
Wake power and purpose and desire?
Ah no, a viewless power within,
Old as the planet, yet new born,
Making her round in God's great field,
Her helping hand to Man doth yield
And his poor engines doth not scorn.

"See where, born of thin water and red flame,
Yon nymph in lowly incarnation,
Intense with glorious power in softest form,
And singing high her strident song of joy,
Comes rushing viewless from the cauldron's throat,
And, at the touch of her cool sister Air,

For sweeter silence drops her ringing song
And ere she parts into the upper void
Doffs graciously her garb invisible,
Caressing her dark Titan lovingly
In Naiad form, that he and all may see,
And with a kiss she melts into the blue.
But ever in the blue she bides her time,
Dons her grey mantle, sweeps down in the rain,
In the still river seeks the haunts of man,
Joins with her sister Fire, and for man's help
Lends life unto his uncouth work again,
Rounding one circle of her magic life.

"Her viewless power withdrawn, that Titan bulk
Appalling with a planet-rush but now,
More helpless than the ocean-stranded hulk,
Scares not the sparrow from the bough.
That fleeting life for aye goes on,
Old as the light, but young as the new day,
No instant tarries when work is done —
A lift — a gleam — and it is gone,
Through universe and planet ranging,
Form and home forever changing,
Speeding joyous on its way,
An instant glory in its passing seen,
A leap, a light, its mightier form between
Illuminating, blessing, blasting,
Sire and son and race outlasting,
In birth, in growth, in act, in thought, in dream,
In love, in light, in death's, or beauty's gleam.

"Strive this power to detain,
Even in godlike human mould,
All thy love and longing vain,
Proteus-like it slips thy hold,
From thy firm grasp elusive glides —
But the wrought miracle abides.

"But deem not, if perchance the power
Stoop from the æther for an hour
To speed the way and ease the lot
Of prince in palace, clown in cot,
That Speed and Comfort are the goal
Can satisfy thy heaven-lent soul.
Whither away? what speed they then to *do*?
Look down upon that hurrying brood
In yon fair city's ways, then tell me true
Pursuers? or pursued?

"Is it for greed and din and strife
Thou wilt for Man from Time redeem
More of the unguided life,
Whirled like an insect down the stream?
Shall haughty Man hail for his chief and lord
The busybody, of the god abhorred?
Nay, the triumph over Time
He shall win who still would climb
Above the turmoil of the mart
A breathing-space to sit apart.
Who from the deafening din his ear,
From blinding dust his eye would clear,
Shall justly weigh the near and far,

Nor let the mote eclipse the star.
Him the near bauble shall not blind
To the dread weight slow piling up behind,
Nor shall he know the day of doom
When the sure overpoise shall come,
The fatal scale shall fall.
Welcome to him shall ever be
The guardians of his destiny,
Clear-eyed Honor, Reverence, Shame,
And elder gods without a name,
Keepers of the sacred bounds
That stay the Furies in their rounds."

Gone is the time
When wrath and guile in the wild Saurian strife
O'er weaker wrecks to savage life
Shall climb;
For in fair form from a blind monad come
The soul of man hath found a home
Sublime.
And be thou sure
The better shall endure;
Yet in life's struggle it shall be no sin
To play the game to win —
What is it for man to win?
Answer, ye crowding memories of this hall!
One stern and noble scene shall stand for all;
On Rappahannock's banks in fancy stand
When chill December lowers o'er the land.

Oh, cold and grey the river-swirls
  Look to the columns marching down,
And deep and dangerous it whirls
  Between them and the rebel town.

And hark! upon the long pontoons
  In broken step, for so 't is meet,
Uncheered by brazen trumpet-tunes
  The multitudinous trampling feet.

And now above the river banks
  Look where the gallant lines deploy.
Ah, many a soldier in those ranks
  How few months since was deemed a boy!

The time is come; and while the shell
  Hot from the batteries scream o'erhead,
Up the bare slope bravely and well
  The long blue lines are swiftly led.

Not wise in war, ah, youth is sure
  One valiant rush can gain the wall
Whence grim battalions all secure
  Pour in thick rain the deadly ball.

One valiant rush — and the blue line
  Withers before the fiery rain,
Yet gather 'neath their country's sign,
  To charge again, — and yet again.

Though ruddy life still fills their veins,
Though Hope and Love alike say *Nay*,
One last, best privilege remains,
Their desperate honor — to obey.

Lit with swift gleams, the dead, white smoke
Climbs 'gainst the dull December sky.
Cold, silent, on the russet slope, —
Yes, in their ranks, the blue-coats lie.

In one brief hour the hero stood revealed;
Calm are the brows once bent upon the foe,
For us the clay-cold lips forever sealed,
Yet through the ages ringing clear and low
An echo from an angel-guarded grave
Comes: *If I lose myself, myself I save.*

Ours is a day of peace; the sleeping sword
May vainly wait the stern, awakening word.
Is ours a day of peace? Ah, think again.
The soldier's course was bright and brief and plain.
Beneath his flag, his weapon in his hand,
The foe before, he waited the command.
Before the winnowing blast of war
The chaff of life fled fast and far;
For in the forest, strange and murk and damp,
Far from home and far from camp,
Where on the lonely picket-line
He prayed and waited for a sign,
A boyish dream returned, and all was plain,
His former life remote and dim and vain;

Honor and duty shone in his clear eyes,
Well worth a brief life's sacrifice.

But we — our lives are far
From serried ranks of war,
Yet in the passing life
Find ever-shifting strife
Wherein no blue or grey shall show
The loyal friend, the open foe.
Where floats the star-wrought banner of our land?
No rallying-sign? In scattered groups we stand
Facing each new guerrilla band,
Conspiring Greed, upon the helpless fed,
Or Toil's brave sons by Villainy misled,
Or idle fops, by wealth and wandering crazed,
Restoring bounds our wiser fathers razed.
The dust and clamor of the street
Shut out the Pleiads' influence sweet,
And for we see in many a lair
A crouching form, shall we despair?
Laugh at Despair. What hath he ever done?
Hope, and Effort, son of Hope,
These alone with Fate can cope,
Alike by life or death have won.

Void of conscience deem thou not
Those who in their toiling lot
Still pursue the things that seem.
While the tribes shall rise and fall
On the flower-embroidered ball,
Hundreds toil for what shall perish,
Yet above all love and cherish

Him who, forgotten and alone,
Their slighted task for them hath done.

The gods — speak they no more ?
When unto thee at noon shall come
Word from the captive in the mine
That the broad sun hath ceased to shine
And thou for his thy faith resign,
Believe the oracles are dumb.
The miracles forever come,
And, oft unheeded, as of yore,
The saints to-day stand at thy door.

The seeming Real to dust may fall,
What is most real, least seen of all
Until the new-born eyes be given,
Blind to the bound 'twixt earth and heaven.

Then, Soul, forget not in thy day
Of hurried toil, of eager play,
To look on Life's astounding dower,
The wealth that shall abide,
The crowded splendor of the instant hour,
The gods that walk beside.

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